

Somalia: Soldiers in SOSO

Robert C. Blackstone

MUCH HAS BEEN written recently about the U.S. military's complicated missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. One moment, they are fighting insurgents; the next, they are negotiating with local clerics. "Every soldier is a diplomat," we hear time and again. Such is the nature of stability operations and support operations (SOSO). So, what does history teach about SOSO and the U.S. soldier's ability to succeed in such complicated operations?

For over 200 years, U.S. Armed Forces have undertaken operations now called SOSO, but the 1992 to 1994 intervention in Somalia is the most instructive. Soldiers in Somalia often moved rapidly between peaceful and combat missions. Thus, the U.S. experience in Somalia provides fertile ground for studying U.S. soldiers' reactions across the SOSO spectrum. Moreover, Somali culture is not only Islamic, it is clan-based, so today's soldiers can profit from an investigation of the experience of their predecessors (and in some cases themselves).

An inquiry into the U.S. experience in Somalia reveals three interrelated lessons for today's soldiers and Marines. First, SOSO are political-military missions for all units involved. Somali hearts and minds became the center of gravity in operations dedicated to security in an environment where clan warlords were dominant political forces. Winning Somali hearts and minds required political savvy and military expertise at all levels of war.

Second, striking a careful balance between the warrior ethos and building friendly relationships is the key to success in SOSO. Because hearts and minds

are crucial to accomplishing the mission, soldiers must win the trust and respect of the populace. If they adopt a single-minded, combat-oriented approach and ignore their political roles, soldiers risk losing this trust and respect. Still, SOSO can be quite dangerous, requiring soldiers to display conventional offensive military capabilities. In a threatening, uncertain environment, maintaining the balance between military force and political tact is difficult but critical.

Third, well-led soldiers can succeed in SOSO and do so without degrading conventional combat capabilities. In fact, *only* soldiers can successfully "do" SOSO, for only they can supply the security necessary to reassure the population. Success depends on how well soldiers balance the security mission with the political mission. In this sense, every private becomes a strategic decisionmaker.

Humanitarian Intervention

In March 1993, the United Nations initiated its second operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II) following a successful initial intervention by a U.S.-led Unified Task Force (UNITAF). The UN quickly established a clear mission for the operation: "Take appropriate action, including enforcement measures, to establish throughout Somalia a secure environment for humanitarian assistance."¹

On the surface, this mission appeared to be strictly humanitarian: this was not a war and would not upset Somali politics. But, delivering humanitarian assistance required political intervention. Walter Clarke, former Deputy Head of the U.S. Liaison Office,

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A Somali boy holds up a PSYOP leaflet showing a Somali and a U.S. soldier shaking hands.

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Mogadishu, and Princeton professor Jeffrey Herbst clearly explain why: “Those who support only humanitarian intervention—in Somalia or elsewhere—imply that . . . mass starvation is . . . an act of nature. In fact, the famine that gripped Somalia in 1992 was fundamentally the result of the evolution of the country’s political economy.”²

Aggressive clan warlords monopolized political power by controlling food distribution, coercing followers through the delivery or denial of food. Protecting humanitarian supplies meant undermining the warlords’ political power. To be successful, intervention would have to be political as well as humanitarian. To that end, UNITAF leaders had engaged powerful warlords in discussions since December 1992.³ The UN also recognized that a political settlement would have to precede large-scale peace enforcement. At a conference at Addis Ababa in March 1993, UNITAF leaders finally convinced 15 Somali clan leaders to support political and economic rehabilitation in Somalia.

Generals and diplomats were not the only ones engaging in politics; the Somalia mission was political on a tactical level as well. After arriving in Somalia, UNITAF leaders established four “no’s”: no “technicals” (makeshift, truck-mounted, crew-served weapons); no looting; no visible weapons; no roadblocks.⁴ However, imposing disarmament challenged the clans by limiting their means of political control. In addition, the warlords construed any attempt to win over the population’s hearts and minds as a threat to their influence.

The task force’s soldiers could only earn the population’s trust at the warlords’ expense. Nevertheless, the coalition had to win over the population or risk forfeiting security. Captain Patrick McGowan, the commanding officer of Company C, 1st Battalion, 22d Infantry Regiment, later noted that units in Somalia inherited a dual mission: “Our combat infantry soldiers . . . faced a requirement to enforce security measures while also trying to convince Somali civilians of [our] good intentions.”⁵ Early on, soldiers acted with this dual mission in mind. In one incident, a U.S. Special Forces A-team, accompanied by a Canadian reconnaissance squadron, encountered a group of Somalis who had been wounded in an ear-

lier clash. The soldiers collected the wounded and transported them to a nearby hospital. Such actions “helped the Somalis gain confidence in the 23-member coalition participating in Operation Restore Hope.”⁶ Providing locals with medicine and paying Somali men for their labor helped American soldiers avoid riotous mobs and false claims of damage to Somali landrights.⁷

One reason to win hearts and minds was to gather human intelligence (HUMINT). In Baidoa, Staff Sergeant Brendon Thomson and Sergeant Wayne Douglas of the Australian Army operated alongside U.S. counterintelligence (CI) personnel to determine Somali attitudes toward the Australian contingent and to seek information on dangerous locals. Soon, CI teams “were able to quickly identify the nature of the banditry in Baidoa using local American and Somali sources,” which proved immensely profitable when the Australians sought to secure the city.⁸

Troops had to act without bias to prevent their actions—peaceful or aggressive—from offending one local leader or another. Brigadier General Lawson Magruder III, Assistant Division Commander for Operations, U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division (Light), and Commander of Combined Task Force Kismayo, said: “While many of the clans and warlords were not happy with how the United States had clamped down on their thievery and freebooting, they at least respected that the Americans were not taking sides.”⁹ Avoiding favoritism was so important to Magruder that at one point he even ordered a helicopter attack against a Somali leader who had

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A 10th Mountain Division MP relaxes with Somalis hired to drive the news media from place to place.

trained at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

Military forces also had to demonstrate they would not usurp local authority. To that end, coalition soldiers worked directly with local elders to open communications with them and, in some cases, even to prosecute criminals. On arriving in Humanitarian Relief Sector (HRS) Baidoa, the 1st Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment (1 RAR) established a civil-military operations team, which met regularly with the chief elder, and sat on various local committees.¹⁰ This ensured that instead of working against coalition forces, Somalis could cooperate directly with UNITAF.

Working with local authorities meant accepting local justice. In HRS Sector Oddur, French soldiers captured a notorious bandit called “the Worm.” They promptly turned him over to local elders for a quick trial and conviction. When the criminal protested his sentence, the elders reconvened to hear his appeal. The result? “The elder issued his ruling. The first punishment was too lenient and the Worm must be executed! The guards immediately dragged the offender outside, there was a short burst of gunfire, and that was the end of the Worm.”¹¹ Although Somali justice might offend Western sensibilities, circumventing the elders was undesirable; politics required coalition forces to show faith in Somali systems.

Patrolling generated the most direct interaction between soldiers and the populace and was critical

to security and winning Somali trust and affection. The Australians used patrols to “constantly put the threat off guard [and to] reassure the majority of the population.”¹² To accomplish these goals, the battalion dispatched patrols at irregular intervals, keeping bandits guessing as to when they would occur. Patrolling soldiers occasionally lived among the Somalis. According to Major John Simeoni, commander of the Australian Army’s Pioneer Platoon, “If the patrol wanted to rest, it would occupy a building or a compound, normally pre-planned, and spend the night with the people.”¹³

When confronted by bandits, the Australian soldiers responded with force. Rather than alienating the population, violence against known villains improved the relationship between 1 RAR and the Baidoans. Although soldiers shot and killed several Somalis, the fact that they had killed “criminals and, in most instances, murderers [improved the battalion’s] standing with the local population.”¹⁴ The Australians were able to combine aggressive patrolling with peaceful efforts to win the respect of the people.

Even so, warlord activity could instigate conflict. In May 1993, the 1st Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, took over as the quick reaction force (QRF) for UNOSOM II.¹⁵ Shortly after its arrival, the QRF was dispatched to Kismayo in southern Somalia to address aggressive clan activity against a Belgian force. Once it secured the city, the QRF’s infantry battalion began investigating “reported militia/bandit

activity” on the outskirts of town. During the investigation, one squad discovered a militia training camp, and in the ensuing fight, the QRF captured 18 militia fighters and leaders.¹⁶ Establishing a safe area of operations for the Belgians brought these soldiers into direct confrontation with a clan warlord’s militia. The squad’s action, while a tactical conventional military operation, was effectively a political act.

Other taskings involved conflict with Somali culture. By Western standards, Somali men grossly mistreated their women. According to Simeoni, “This often brought [Australian] soldiers into direct confrontation with Somali men, who in their estimation, needed to be educated in the proper treatment and respect of women.”¹⁷ The soldiers repeatedly witnessed incidents of child beating and were told of female circumcisions. At times, the Australians tried to stop such activities, but Simeoni later conceded that peacekeepers were “not there to instill western values.” In fact, when the UN attempted to inculcate such values, its actions generated resentment. U.S. Army QRF Colonel Mark Van Drie noted that the UN’s decision to grant women the vote and to fill half of the government positions with women was “bound to raise nothing but resentment and resistance.”¹⁸

On the whole, coalition forces negotiated the political-military operation capably. Nevertheless, the events of 5 June 1993 posed a challenge that might have led them to minimize the political element of their mission. Forces from Mohammed Farah Aideded’s Somali National Alliance (SNA) unexpectedly assaulted Pakistani troops as they inspected an arms storage facility in Mogadishu. Elsewhere in the city, SNA forces attacked a food-distribution center manned by Pakistani soldiers. The nearly simultaneous attacks killed 24 Pakistanis and wounded 44 others. The SNA’s mutilation and disemboweling of the soldiers’ bodies was horrifying.¹⁹ Many considered the attacks a premeditated ambush. According to U.S. Army Master Sergeant and liaison to the Pakistanis Mark Olin, the atrocities “caught everybody off guard. Aideded’s clans basically declared war on the United Nations.”²⁰

The UN reacted quickly, passing Security Council Resolution 837 and adopting a more aggressive stance toward Aideded. On the ground in Mogadishu, many soldiers adopted a combat posture, both tactically and psychologically. “I told my company clearly that this was no food distribution mission . . . and in my analysis would be a gunfight all the way,” wrote Mark Suich, a QRF company commander.²¹ Staff Sergeant Richard Roberts was even more frank:

“We’d all be happy just to nail [Aideded] to a tree.” Many American soldiers defined their mission in such terms because they were members of the QRF, a unit not usually designated for humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, one must note the danger of redefining the mission after an attack. If aggressive sentiments are allowed to predominate in a SOSO mission, political reconciliation—half the mission—is sidelined.

Operations after 5 June 1993 reflected a more aggressive posture by UNOSOM II forces. In mid-June, the United States shipped AC-130 Spectre gunships to Somalia, which the soldiers considered a step toward an “honest-to-God takedown of any weapons storage sites that were left.”²² Weapons storage sites were not the only targets. On 16 and 17 June, a Pakistani and Moroccan force, with American liaisons and air support, attacked top SNA leaders’ villas, and in August, U.S. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin deployed Task Force Ranger (TFR) to Somalia to capture and detain Aideded.²³

The Rangers defined their mission as ensuring the safety of humanitarian operations, but they came to believe that “Aideded’s capture and/or the breakup of the SNA’s infrastructure” was the path to success, which is not to say military leaders in Somalia neglected politics.²⁴ Turkish Lieutenant General Cevik Bir, commander of the UN multinational force, and U.S. Army Lieutenant General Thomas Montgomery, commander of U.S. Forces in Somalia and the UNOSOM II deputy commander, continued to insist that reconciliation in Somalia required political overtures.²⁵ But many soldiers and policymakers focused on offensive military operations despite the political implications.

One exception demonstrates the continued importance of personal interactions with the Somalis: “[T]he [QRF] commander, Colonel [James] Campbell could do pretty much as he pleased. One of those things was to go on cordon and searches where he would have his interpreter gather a crowd and then talk with them. [Olin] was usually in charge of security on these forays and [Campbell’s] tendency to stand in the open and allow unknown Somalis to gather in close around him drove Olin to the point of distraction. [Campbell] even did this in Habr Gadr [Aideded’s subclan] areas where, amazingly enough, he was very well received, with the exception of the occasional hard-eyed young man who would pass by. . . . Campbell’s command presence, combined with his friendly and courteous manner to the Somalis, made him a figure of respect, even in the areas where Americans and



A Somali clan representative hands out work passes to clan members granted permission to work on Sword Base, Mogadishu. Transactions between the local populace and military units create unique security challenges for commanders.

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[UN] forces were not normally welcomed.”²⁶

In retrospect, Campbell’s actions appear fundamental to a SOSO mission. He recognized that capturing Aided or his lieutenants was only one part of securing Mogadishu for humanitarian aid; the other part was political and required the Somali people’s faith and trust. Coupling combat with peaceful conversation was exactly what a successful mission demanded, in both hostile and friendly neighborhoods.

All of this reveals an important lesson: during SOSO, the people are the center of gravity. Unless military forces move among them, gaining their respect and winning their hearts and minds, the military neglects a critical part of its mission. Still, soldiers will continue to confront the challenge of ambushes and unanticipated outbursts of hostility. Their success depends on their response; they must act as combat infantrymen and as diplomats, moving quickly and seamlessly between the two roles.

Combat, the Warrior Ethos, and SOSO

Becoming a soldier-diplomat is easier said than done. As Olin said of Somalia operations: “To take a combat offensive fighting force and have them become policemen is difficult as hell.”²⁷ Why? Because infantrymen are taught from their first days

of training to attack, not to comfort. Toning down the warrior ethos inculcated in every U.S. soldier is difficult and dangerous. The ethos is generally understood to be a code of professional conduct that espouses a willingness to close with and destroy an enemy in combat and to never leave a comrade behind. Many believe this belligerent ethos makes soldiers ill-equipped for noncombat missions and that assigning them to such missions degrades the ethos and compromises soldiers’ safety. Assessing the truth of these arguments requires another look at soldiers’ experiences in Somalia.

In a professional military, soldiers train for years in an art they seldom get to practice. When given the opportunity to fight, they are often eager to test themselves. One lieutenant colonel recently said, “The warrior side, the side that has been cultivated through many years of physical and mental exertion, study, and training would love the challenge [of combat].”²⁸ A U.S. staff sergeant in Somalia voiced a similar desire to “put his years of training to the test.”²⁹ Australian soldiers exhibited the same spirit. According to Australian Army Reserve officer and author Bob Breen, who accompanied 1 RAR in Somalia, the “diggers were very keen to test themselves in combat. [Many] experienced feelings of great excitement [when they heard] Baidoa crackle with gunfire.”³⁰

Despite a disorienting environment and personal fear, these professional soldiers performed remarkably well once engaged in high-intensity combat, reflecting their training, commitment to their comrades, and inspired small-unit leadership. The well-publicized success of the Rangers and soldiers of the QRF on 3 and 4 October 1993 proved how capable U.S. soldiers were when faced with high-intensity combat situations. But, combat aptitude was useful even in lower-intensity environments. While it was vital for soldiers to create peaceful links to Somali communities, as members of a military force they were, above all else, expected to protect Somalis from bandits and warlords.

Simeoni describes the dual character of SOSO: "While we respected the Somali people, and were quite friendly with them, particularly the kids who were great fun, they had an expectation; we were a professional military force and could bring that force to bear in a moment's notice. That is a powerful tool in SOSO. [W]e are professionals and [would] not be caught with our guard down."³¹ Thus, combat readiness fostered a safe environment and linked soldiers to the population—a critical component of a political-military mission.

Soldiers with UNITAF learned early on they would need to remain alert and ready for combat. "I've been exposed to more danger here than during my 11 months in Saudi Arabia," Timothy Carter, a Persian Gulf War veteran, told a reporter.³² By the time UNOSOM II began, Somalia was presumed largely pacified. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dazé asserted, "Mogadishu was a relatively peaceful place. Soldiers [were] going out in single vehicles [despite official policy]."³³ Olin called the situation almost too comfortable, noting that a few days before 5 June, soldiers had confidently eaten at an open-air market. In retrospect, the result was predictable: "We were lulled into [5 June]."³⁴

Some soldiers, particularly in the QRF, came to see the mission solely in terms of combat. By October, when he arrived as part of a beefed-up American force, Major Thomas Lafleur was prepared to fight. Asked to describe the general feeling in his platoon, he responded frankly: "It was combat. We were prepared to find, fix, and finish any opposing force that threatened any UN force."³⁵ Aggressiveness came almost naturally to those who deployed after 5 June 1993. Nonetheless, UNOSOM II's mission required more than military security: soldiers had to control their aggressiveness and continue to inspire friendly sentiments among the Somali people.

Arguing that military forces must strike a balance

between aggressiveness and friendliness is all well and good, but who is to monitor this balance? The answer speaks to the nature of SOSO as political-military at all levels. Junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) must control the tempo of operations, take charge of their troops, and lead them calmly and forcefully in combat and with equanimity when at peace. Simeoni "found this to be one of [his] main tasks, curbing the endless enthusiasms of . . . subordinates to find trouble."³⁶ The task is not easy, especially since junior officers and NCOs also want to fight. But SOSO is not a mission that can leave the politics to diplomats and general officers. Those with "boots on the ground" must understand the political situation and be able to control the tactics and sentiments of their companies, platoons, squads, and fire teams.

Real Soldiers "Do" SOSO

Major General S.L. Arnold, Commander of U.S. Army units in Somalia, was certain combat soldiers could perform capably in low- to mid-intensity environments: "Well-trained, combat-ready, disciplined soldiers can easily adapt to peacekeeping or peace enforcement missions. Train them for war; they adapt quickly and easily to Somalia-type situations."³⁷ But, the situation in Somalia was not so simple: soldiers at all levels, in all units, had to negotiate a political-military mission without growing too complacent or too aggressive. Given these difficulties, what does the experience of Somalia reveal about the ability of soldiers to "do" SOSO?

First, Somalia teaches that combat-trained soldiers can successfully accomplish SOSO missions. Indeed, the judicious use of force was critical to winning trust and respect in Somalia. Combat readiness and friendship went hand-in-hand. Striking this balance is not done quickly and easily, however. Two preconditions are necessary. First, soldiers must actually see the need for their assistance. Only after witnessing "children . . . who were just pathetic" did U.S. Army Sergeant Stan Hayes truly believe in the wisdom of his mission.³⁸ Second, and more important, soldiers must understand the nature of the mission as political-military and must recognize that hearts and minds are the center of gravity. Junior officers and NCOs are critical to success. They must lead their troops into combat and restrain them when the situation requires tact. The Australians repeatedly mentioned the "Strategic Corporal." In SOSO, such an image is telling.

Higher commanders are not left without a role. On the contrary, strategists must understand the

deeply political dimension of SOSO before involving their forces and must prepare subordinate commanders for local politics. Operational commanders should ensure tactical aggressiveness does not overwhelm strategic politics by carefully considering the missions they approve and tempering their subordinates' overly belligerent enthusiasms. More important, strategists must understand that, because it takes time and persistence to win people's hearts and minds, SOSO missions will likely be long-term affairs. Somalia deceived many into believing military forces could secure convoy routes, distribute food, and then leave, but the mission was inherently more complex than such estimations acknowledged. To truly secure Somalia, forces would have had to remain indefinitely.

Observing that successful SOSO missions are likely to be long-term raises another question: Do such missions degrade units' conventional capabilities? The answer is an emphatic "No." First, units can rotate taskings, allowing some to train in combat and marksmanship while others engage in low-intensity operations. Both U.S. and Australian units used rotation systems to allow such training. Second, the nature of the mission, which requires combat readiness, means soldiers must remain alert and prepared for a fight. Somalia allowed units to practice combat tasks, such as patrolling, with real consequences.

Oversimplified arguments about "warriors" sometimes imply that soldiers are incapable of anything

but warfighting. This is not the case. One young soldier's actions are instructive. During a cordon-and-search operation in 1993, the soldier, a burly young man from Massachusetts, nicknamed the "Moose of Mogadishu," charged headlong into an occupied building. Gunfire did not meet his entrance; instead, he encountered a blanketed baby, not yet 1 year old. The "Moose" immediately slung his rifle over his shoulder, grabbed the baby, and ran to safety. Was his "warrior ethos" compromised? Not likely. The Moose immediately returned to his aggressive search.³⁹

All of this reveals one central lesson: combat-trained soldiers can be capable in SOSO if they avoid the tactical and psychological snowball effect that can occur after repeated insurgent attacks. They must learn to respond with military force and political tact. Soldiers are the only people who are equipped to succeed in such environments. Their warrior ethos, if properly channeled, can help them accomplish SOSO missions by convincing the population of their willingness to provide safety. Channeling that ethos falls to small-unit leaders as well as higher commanders. Although this is an immensely difficult task—perhaps the lesson most obvious from Somalia—it is possible. As U.S. forces once again grapple with enemies inside states in disarray, they can draw confidence and caution from the experiences of coalition soldiers in Somalia in 1993. *MR*

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Robert C. Blackstone was an Enterprise Intern with the U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, Quantico, Virginia, in 2003 and 2004. He received a B.A. from Williams College, and he is a Ph.D. candidate in military history at the University of Kansas and a Dissertation Fellow at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.